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ABSTRACT

Many people have attempted to define exactly what racism is and what causes it. While there is no commonly accepted definition, there is agreement with regard to the facts that (1) no scientific evidence has been found to support the belief that race determines the history and culture of a people; (2) racism is a learned behavior; (3) definitions of racism which do not include a study of socioeconomic factors are confusing; and (4) racism is an institutional problem. To understand racism in America, one must study the history of the development of racist thinking, beginning with slave codes passed in the 17th century through the 19th century, the notion of "race suicide" (genetic inferiority), the erosion of the Reconstruction Period rights given to blacks, up through the inequalities of the 1950s and 1960s. Even with all the recently enacted legislation and institutional policy changes, racism, overt and covert, is still a significant factor in American society. The question of whether racism is primarily overt or covert, individual or institutional, or specifically a white problem is debated frequently. It is certain, however, that because white people are dominant in the United States, white racism and institutional racism are one and the same, often denying non-whites a relevant education, a voice in political processes, the rights to economic determination, just treatment under the law, and decent health care. (Author/WI)

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RACISM: THE EVOLUTION OF A CONCEPT

by Ann S. Coles

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Many people have attempted to define exactly what racism is and what causes it. These definitions range from simplistic understatements and misnomers to complex delineations requiring extensive historical knowledge in order to be fully understood. A recent dictionary definition of racism states that it is "the notion that one's own ethnic stock is superior" while Whitney Young, the late president of the National Urban League, defines it as "the assumption of superiority and the arrogance that goes with it."[1] Another definition is offered by Robert Allen, a contemporary sociologist, who describes racism in terms of an ideology of white superiority asserting the inherent superiority of whites and the inborn irreversible inferiority of blacks."[2] Robert Terry, the author of For Whites Only, sees racism as "any activity by individuals, groups, institutions or cultures that treats human beings unjustly because of color and rationalizes that treatment by attributing to them undesirable biological, psychological, social or cultural characteristics."[3] Still another view of racism is held by James Boggs who defines it as the systematized oppression of one race by another, by which he means the various forms of oppression within every sphere of social relations from economic exploitation and political subordination to cultural devaluation and psychological violation.

While it is clear from these definitions and others that there is no commonly accepted notion of what racism is, some areas of agreement exist with regard to its meaning and significance. First, there is emphatic agreement that no scientific evidence has been found to support the widely held beliefs that people of different races have different histories and cultures because of their race. Several historians have noted that such pseudo-scientific rationalizations for racism began to be formulated only after racism as a concept had been developed among whites to explain the inferior status to which they assigned nonwhites. Agreement also exists that racism is not a mental quirk or a psychological flaw on the part of individuals, but that because the thinking of people is significantly molded by the social situations into which they are born, racism is part of an individual's learned behavior which is handed down one generation to another through the social and cultural structures of a society. There is further agreement that a definition of racism which considers only the origins and development of a philosophy of racial superiority rather than a study of the socio-economic conditions that have given rise to racism is confusing and misleading. Consensus also exists that racism is an institutional as well as an ideological problem, and is reflected in institutional policies and practices which function to maintain the subordination of one racial group by another.

In attempting to understand the complex nature of racism, and the difficulties involved in defining it, it is helpful to consider the development of racism in an historical context. Racism is part of the basic fabric of American society, woven into it over a period of 350 years. The labor shortage in the seventeenth century American colonies which was created by the needs of the plantation economy was the underlying factor behind the transportation of West Africans to the U.S. to be sold as slaves. The need to rationalize the enslavement of these people led to the development of an elaborate theory of the inferiority of colored people which would support their defacto status. Cloaked in scientific objectivity, myths of black inferiority, animality and sexual wantonness were invented in order to maintain harmony with the religious and political beliefs of the colonists who also had proclaimed the equality of all men and the importance of individual rights. What ultimately emerged was a doctrine of racism that provided ideological and moral justification for an established system

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of social relations which excluded and exploited blacks on the grounds that they were incapable of achieving the standards of white society. This exclusion extended to the foundations of the social and political institutions of the U.S., beginning with the slave codes passed in the late 1600's and the federal constitution written in 1778 which declared the legal status of slaves as three fifths men.

The racist ideology erected to justify slavery continued after the Civil War, this time serving the needs of the increasingly monopolistic economy and justifying U.S. imperialism. At this point there was a shift in racist thinking from denying the humanity of black people on the basis of biological/cultural inferiority to the evolutionists' view of inferior races which must be led by a master race. The most elaborate expression of this new concept of racism was found in Social Darwinism which provided 'scientific' proof that those who were on top socially and economically deserved to be there and that the domination of the white race over darker races was ordained by the natural order. Social Darwinism was based on the Darwinian theory of natural selection which states that in the competition among the species only the fittest survive, and that there is a continuing struggle with the weak succumbing to the strong. This ideology emphasized intense competition and struggle; it categorized nonwhites as inferior races on the basis of the supposed simplicity of their cultures and their lack of material achievement: it defined imperial expansion as a positive expression of the so-called manifest destiny of white races to dominate; and it rationalized severe racial oppression of nonwhites on a 'natural' and unchanging racial hierachy.

Another major component of racist thinking during this period was the concept of race suicide. Among those who subscribed to this notion was Henry Cabot Lodge, Sr., the chief spokesman for the restriction of immigration in the late 1800's. Lodge defined race not just as a biological concept including physical and anatomical differences but also one which included mental and moral characteristics, and cultural attributes such as language and art which he believed were inherited. Lodge, along with other social scientists at that time, believed that on the basis of these characteristics blacks were racially inferior, and in the 1890's genetic studies were revived in order to demonstrate the genetic transmission of characteristics from one generation to another. These studies led to the eugenics movement which gained support in the U.S. in the early 1900's and added another dimension to the concept of racism. Eugenics, the study of human improvement by genetic control, ascribed deviancy to genes rather than to social forces and suggested the prevention of propagation among deviant types such as nonwhite races as the solution to social problems.

These racist ideologies which developed after the Civil War helped to insure the continued denial of economic, political, and social equality for blacks. When the federal troops withdrew from the South in the late 1870's, the rights given to blacks during the Reconstruction period were slowly eroded, beginning with the suppression of the right to vote and followed by the passage of numerous laws requiring segregation on all levels of biracial interaction, including separate public facilities for whites and nonwhites. This systematic denial of the rights of blacks culminated during the administration of Woodrow Wilson who extended segregation to the federal civil service, including toilets, lunchroom facilities and working areas, thus reversing a fifty year policy of an integrated civil service: and so, as the U.S. prepared to enter World War I to insure democracy for the world, blacks found themselves more threatened and discriminated against than at any time since the Civil War.

Racism as an ideology and a practice of social, political, and economic

institutions in the U.S. continued in this way until the early 1950's. After that time, movements for full racial equality emerged in force, beginning in 1954 when the principle of political and social equality for nonwhites was stipulated by the federal courts and later with the enactment of federal and state laws to insure racial equality. The record of civil rights actions aimed at the elimination of racism has been impressive in recent years as compared with the past, including the forcible desegregation of schools and the federally supported programs to eliminate poverty and improve housing, education, and employment opportunities for minorities, the elimination of openly racist clauses from union charters and real estate contracts, and the commitment of large industries and businesses to equal employment opportunity practices.

Yet with all the federal and state legislation, court orders, and institutional policy changes of recent times, while the U.S. appears to have made substantial progress toward the eradication of racial injustices, racism in both its overt and covert forms is still a significant factor in contemporary American society. In the late 1960's this subject was the focus of two major federal reports--one by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders in 1968, known as the Kerner Commission Report, and the other by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in 1970, "Racism in America and How to Combat It." In investigating the causes of the racial disorders in the 1960's, the Kerner Commission Report found that "certain fundamental matters are clear. Of these the most fundamental is the racial attitudes and behavior of white Americans toward black Americans. Race prejudice has shaped our history decisively in the past: it now threatens to do so again. White racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mistrust which has been accumulating in our cities since the end of World War II."[4]

The Civil Rights Commission Report specifically defined the concept of white racism as introduced in the Kerner Report and linked it directly to many examples of racist institutional practices. In the Civil Rights Commission Report racism was defined in operational rather than ideological terms as "any attitude, action or institutional structure which subordinates a person or group because of his or their color...this is true of Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, and Native Americans. Specifically white racism subordinates members of all these other groups primarily because they are not white in color...racism is not just a matter of attitudes; actions and institutional structures, especially, can also be forms of racism."[5] This report also grouped acts of white racism into two basic categories: overt racism, the use of color per se as a subordinating factor, and institutional subordination, which places persons in an inferior position by means of institutional structures and actions.

Today much confusion and disagreement still exists concerning the nature and causes of racism. The question of whether it is primarily overt or covert in nature, whether it is caused by individual or institutional behavior, whether or not it is specifically a 'white' problem, is debated frequently. The possibilities of these arguments ever being resolved are unlikely, for the reality of racism in its contemporary form encompasses some of each. Stokely Carmichael, Charles Hamilton and Whitney Young accurately describe racism as both overt and covert: consisting of overt acts of blatent prejudice, subordination and brutality by individuals of one race against another: and covert in terms of a far more subtle and less easily identifiable form which originates in the operation of established institutions in the society, and thus is more readily, though silently and often unknowingly, accepted by

whites. Louis Knowles and Kenneth Prewitt are correct when, while they acknowledge the importance of individual racist acts, they place greater emphasis on institutional racism as reflected in the policies and practices of societal institutions which systematically subordinate nonwhites at the same time that they benefit whites. Those who view the significance of racism primarily in terms of white racism are also accurate. In the U.S. whiteness has always been the distinguishing feature of those people and institutions practicing racial subordination. It is also clear that racism and white racism mean the same thing if we are referring to practises of major institutions and dominant societal patterns in the U.S. today. White people are in the majority in the country; therefore, government, business, industry, churches, educational and other institutions are almost always dominated by whites and, as such, frequently fail to provide nonwhites with the means for a relevant and meaningful education, a voice in political processes, the rights of economic self-determination, just treatment under law or decent health care.

Thus, while each definition of racism contributes to a better understanding of its nature and its causes, no one explanation--be it historical, economic, individual, cultural, or institutional--is adequate to fully account for the complexity and pervasiveness of racism as we know it today.

1. Young, Beyond Racism(New York: McGraw Hill, 1969), p. 87.

2. Allen, Reluctant Reformers: Racism and Social Reform Movements in the United States(New York: Anchor Books, 1975), p. 3.

3. Terry, For Whites Only(Detroit: Detroit Industrial Mission, 1970), p. 41.

4. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders Report(New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1968), p. 203.

5. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, "Racism in America and How to Combat It" (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970), p. 5. (Washington, DC: NIE-ERIC, ED039302)

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